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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1330
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN PRIORITY 0194
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2181
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0427
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SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY DIRECTOR ON ELECTORAL REGISTRY AUDIT

REF: CARACAS 01719

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) In a lunch on June 27, Simon Bolivar University rector Benjamin Sharifker told the Ambassador and PAO that the three main opposition candidates had asked the three rectors to reach an accommodation with the National Electoral Council (CNE) over their participation in a university-led audit of the electoral registry. The rectors demurred, citing their serious concerns about the audit's academic and scientific integrity, given the CNE's requirement for the audit and its addition of Chavista controlled universities. However, Sharifker said, if technical people from their universities wished to participate personally as representatives of the candidates in the CNE-sanctioned audit, the rectors would have no objections. We understand the CNE and opposition candidates have approached some of the autonomous university experts about participating in the audit, but this will not constitute an effective independent review of the registry as demanded by the opposition. End Summary.

The Fight for a Meaningful Audit

¶2. (C) In a lunch with the Ambassador and PAO on June 27, Simon Bolivar University (USB) rector Benjamin Sharifker

discussed the recent fight between autonomous universities USB, Central Venezuelan University (UCV), and the Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB), and the National Electoral Council (CNE) on the methodology for auditing the permanent electoral registry (REP) (ref a). Sharifker told the Ambassador that the three rectors had declined to participate in the CNE-sanctioned audit because of concerns about the scientific and academic integrity of the study. The main problem, Sharifker explained, was the CNE's insistence on controlling access to data from the REP, which undermined the concept of an independent audit. Also, the universities, while respecting the CAPEL audit, thought it was incomplete and that their proposal would have done more to boost voter confidence in the registry. Sharifker confirmed the universities would not reverse their decision, despite pressure from the leading opposition candidates to reconsider. However, he said the rectors would have no objections, if technical people from their universities wished to personally participate in the audit. We understand that some university experts have been approached by CNE officials and presidential candidates that were incorporating representatives to observe the study.

13. (C) During a June 22 conversation with poloff Sharifker described talks within the technical committee charged with developing a methodology for the audit as tense. Autonomous reps were outnumbered by almost two to one by pro-Chavista members in the committee, which was comprised of 2 representatives from each university and the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Investigation. According to reports Sharifker received, the pro-government universities already

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knew what the parameters of the audit would be and were clearly uninterested in considering alternative methodologies. The rector said the CNE never explained its reasons for not accepting the USB/UCV/UCAB proposal and merely reiterated the refrain that the CAPEL audit was fine.

What the Universities Would Have Done

14. (C) Sharifker explained to poloff that while the CNE approved an audit that examines the REP for inconsistencies (ref a), the autonomous universities' proposal would have taken the 100 voting centers that best tracked with the outcome of a national election, and examined the voter lists of each of those centers to determine their accuracy. If those voter rolls contained few errors, the universities could conclude that the total number of errors in the REP would not be enough to skew election results, or vice versa, if many errors were found. Sharifker said this study had been done in several countries where political polarization and voter confidence had been an issue, such as post-Pinochet Chile, South Africa, Spain (in response to concerns raised by then-opposition party PSOE), and Nicaragua. The universities had also proposed comparing the REP to National Institute of Statistics' population projections to determine if the number of registered voters reflected the country's current geographic and age breakdown. This section would have included a special emphasis on areas near the border with Colombia where the REP indicates there may be more registered voters than residents.

Next Steps

15. (C) Sharifker told poloff the universities have decided to proceed independently with their study using data they unofficially procured from the CNE. He said they will also hold a forum on the REP in mid-July with statisticians that have used their audit model elsewhere. Referring to the opposition's attempts to change the rectors' minds, Sharifker likened their suggestion to having a choice between being

allowed to enter a stadium but having to keep your eyes closed during the game, or listening to the game on the radio at home. "I'd rather be at home," he said.

Comment

16. (C) The rectors' experience shows--once again--that the current CNE is no more transparent than its predecessor. The CNE-sanctioned audit, even if autonomous university professors individually participate, is not the same as the independent review called for by the opposition or international observers. The CNE's decision to reject such a targeted audit as the autonomous universities proposed is not surprising because the CNE does not want to make real changes that could undermine their ability to politically manipulate the electoral system. The REP is generally thought to be flawed, but the extent of such flaws, if demonstrated, could undermine the legitimacy of recent elections. The

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CNE-approved audit is just another BRV attempt to appear to be fair and transparent without making any substantive changes.

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